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Tour gives close-up of South Mountain Freeway route

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A guided bus tour of the proposed South Mountain Freeway on Saturday left some wanting more.

The three-hour tour didn't give them the answers they sought about cost, what will happen to homes and a school along the tentative freeway's path, and what members of the Gila River Indian Community think.

Ten members of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, 12 members of the Arizona Department of Transportation's study team and four invited community members took the tour. It started at an ADOT office in downtown Phoenix and headed to Ahwatukee Foothills, where participants got off to look at a mountain ridge where the proposed freeway would cut through.

"We think it was educational," ADOT spokesman Doug Nintzel said of the tour. "Certainly some members were able to see things they hadn't seen before and ask some questions and we would hope that getting a closer look at the study area is a benefit as the advisory team's process moves ahead."

The team's mission is to recommend whether the freeway should be built or not. They will not make any additional recommendations about particular routes.

The freeway would run along Pecos Road, cut through South Mountain Park and connect to Interstate10 at 55th Avenue. The route would cut through about 32 acres in South Mountain Park, including making cuts in mountain ridges that range from 120 to 220 feet deep, ADOT officials said.

Ahwatukee resident and advisory team member Carola Tamarkin said she was taken aback when the group stopped near several homes that would be in the freeway path towards the western edge of Ahwatukee.

"I don't understand how they are still building here," she said.

ADOT notifies the city, which informs developers of proposed freeways, said Amy Edwards, HDR project manager.

Tolleson resident and committee member David Lafferty said he thought developers see empty lots and focus on the money they can make.

ADOT has begun acquiring some land in Ahwatukee along the route, and could purchase homes impacted by the freeway if it is built, Nintzel said.

Committee member John Rodriguez, who lives in Ahwatukee Foothills, said he thought it was good that some people had a chance to see the proposed route along the Pecos Road alignment. But Rodriguez said he was disappointed that state elected officials, the ADOT director and more study team members did not attend. He was also disappointed that the group couldn't get up closer to the route.

"There wasn't a whole lot of opportunity to stop, to get out," he said.

ADOT wanted to organize a hike of a mountain ridge in Ahwatukee but could not get permission from private property owners there, said Tim Tait, ADOT community relations director.

Rodriguez asked the study team, which included Federal Highway Administration and HDR Engineering, how much had been spent so far on the South Mountain Freeway study.

More than $1 million has been paid to HDR since 2001 but total, exact project study costs were not available Saturday, ADOT officials said.

"They're just skirting the issues," Rodriguez said.

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I've seen the markings of the proposed highway and it makes me sick to my stomach the damage that will be done by building the road under the current plan. Strike a deal with the Gila Indian community to build the highway to the south of Pecos and west of the mountains or don't build it at all. Why are we clinging to a plan that is outdated and no longer is the a fit for the city?

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